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(54) **ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE NON-THERMAL PLASMA DEVICE TO CLEAN AND STERILIZE THE SURFACES OF PROBES, CANNULAS, PIN TOOLS, PIPETTES AND SPRAY HEADS**

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See application file for complete search history.

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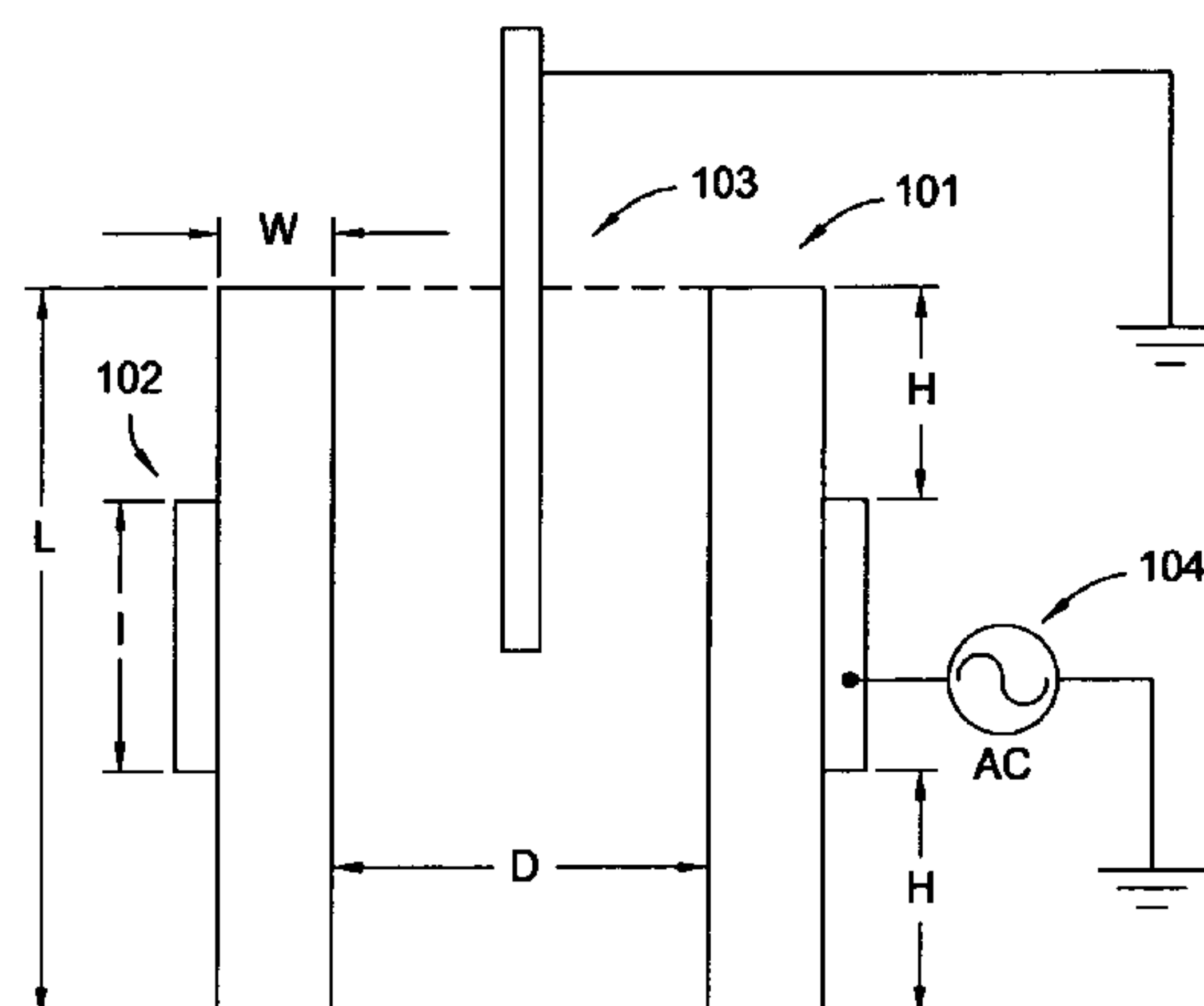
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

The present invention relates to methods and apparatuses for the use of atmospheric pressure non-thermal plasma to clean and sterilize the surfaces of liquid handling devices.

25 Claims, 3 Drawing Sheets



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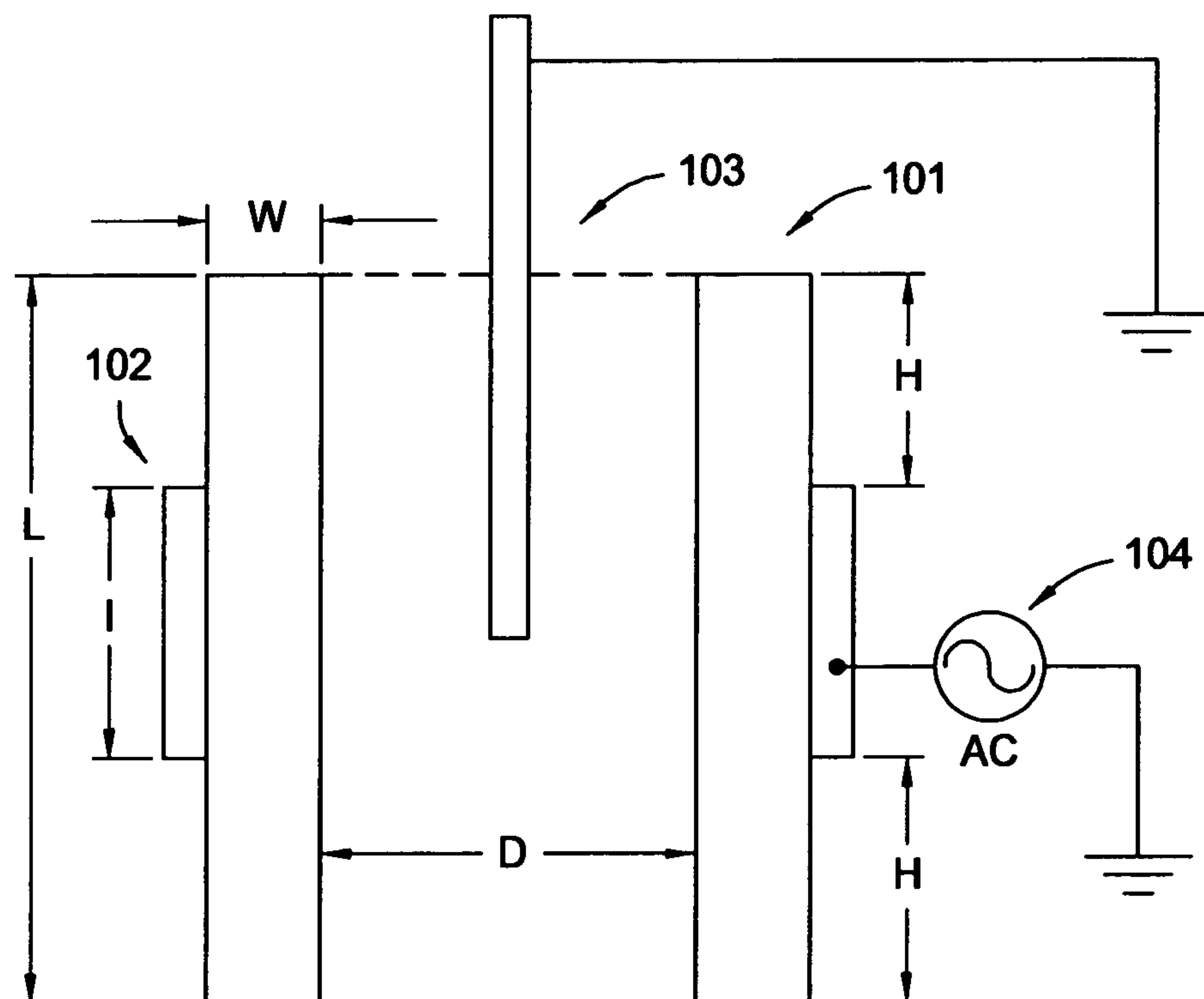


FIG. 1

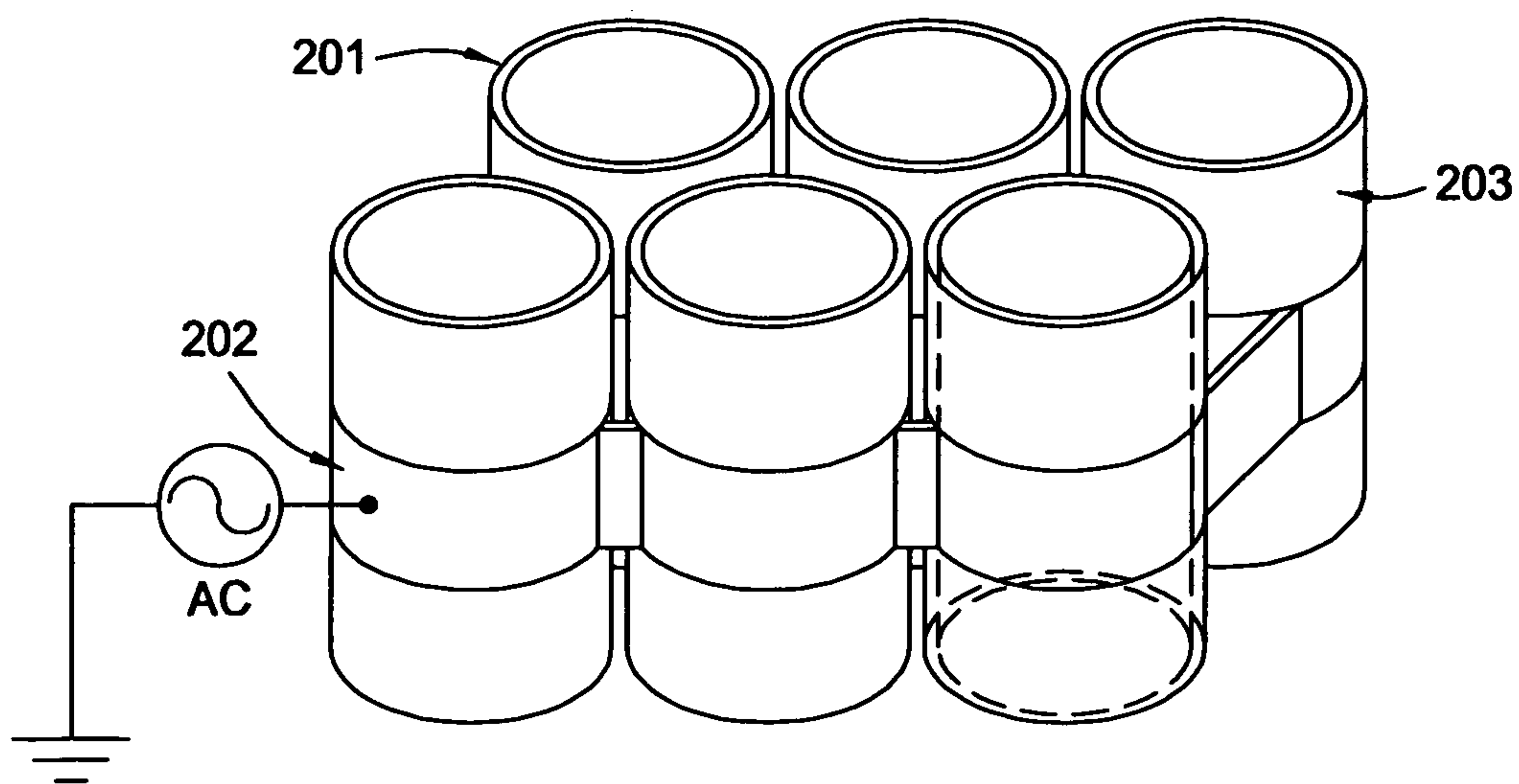


FIG. 2

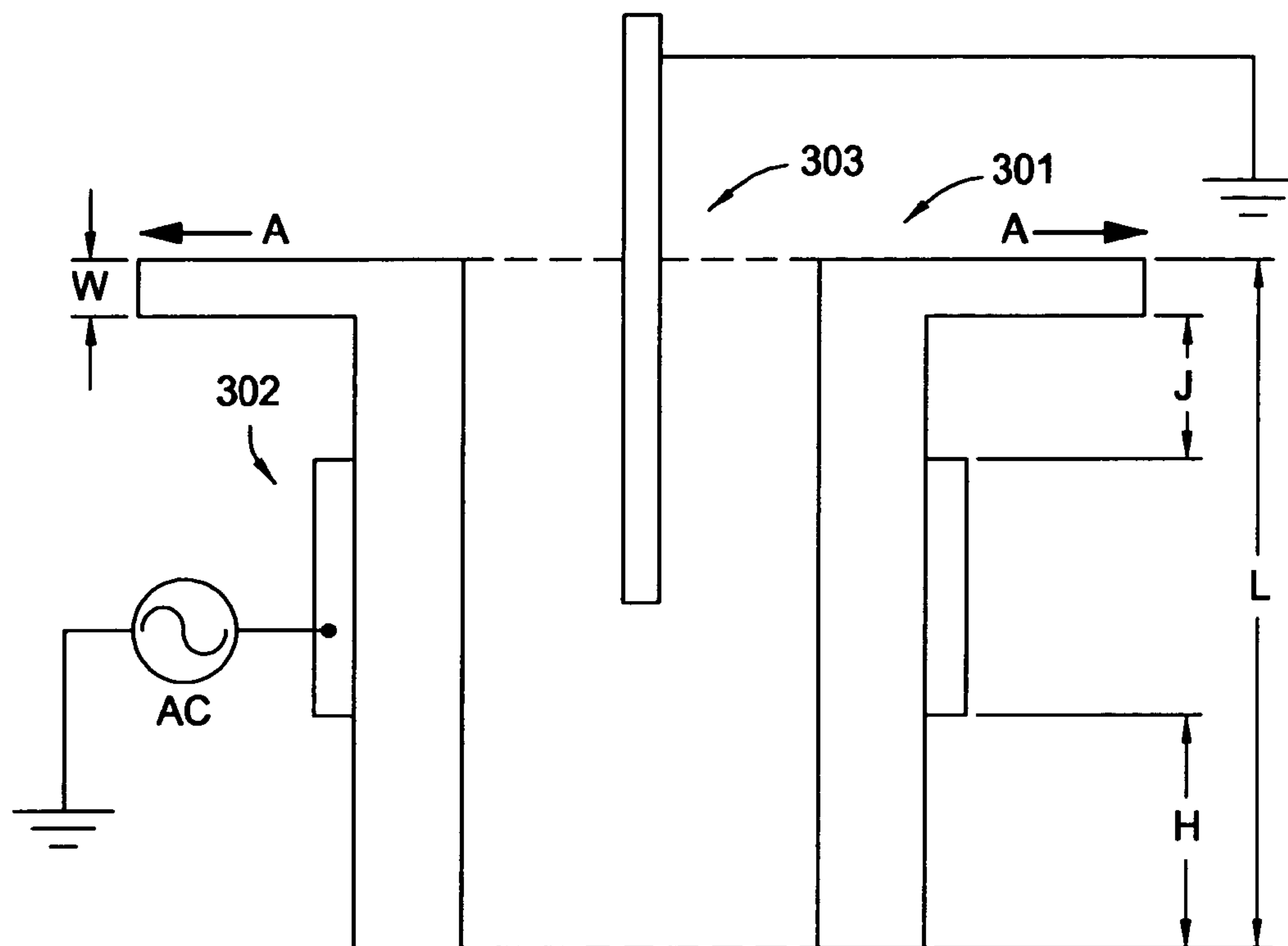


FIG. 3

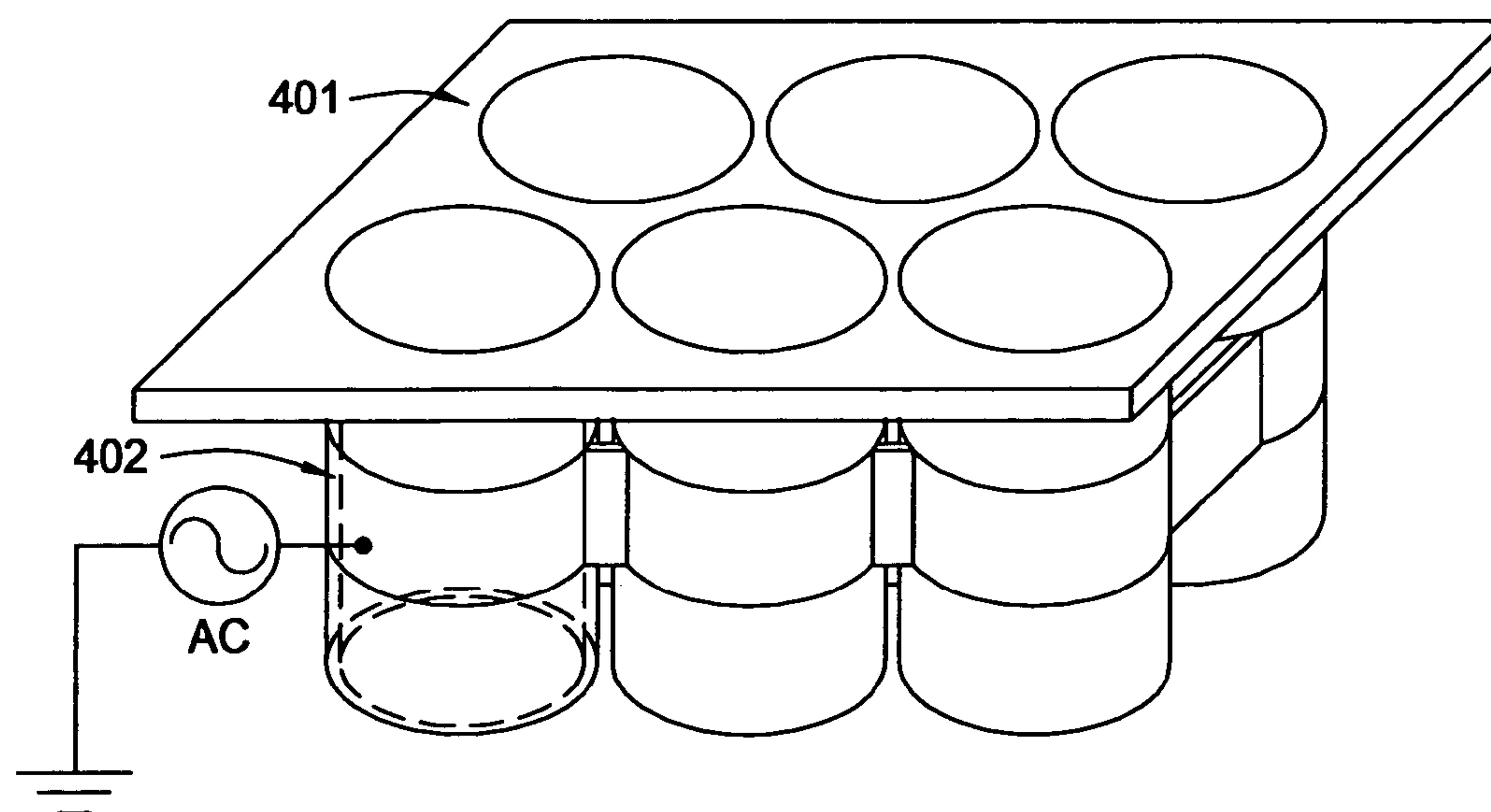


FIG. 4

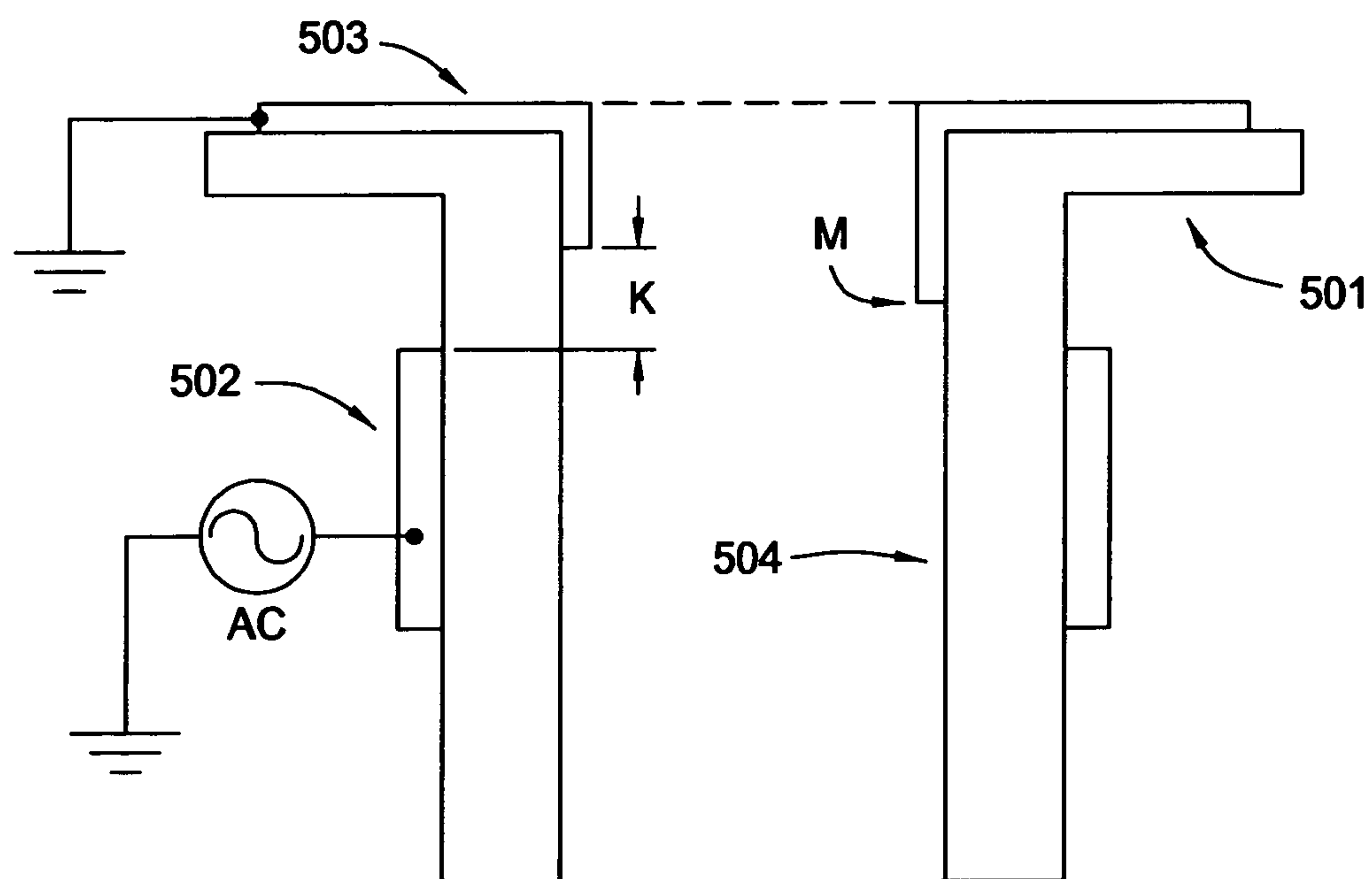


FIG. 5

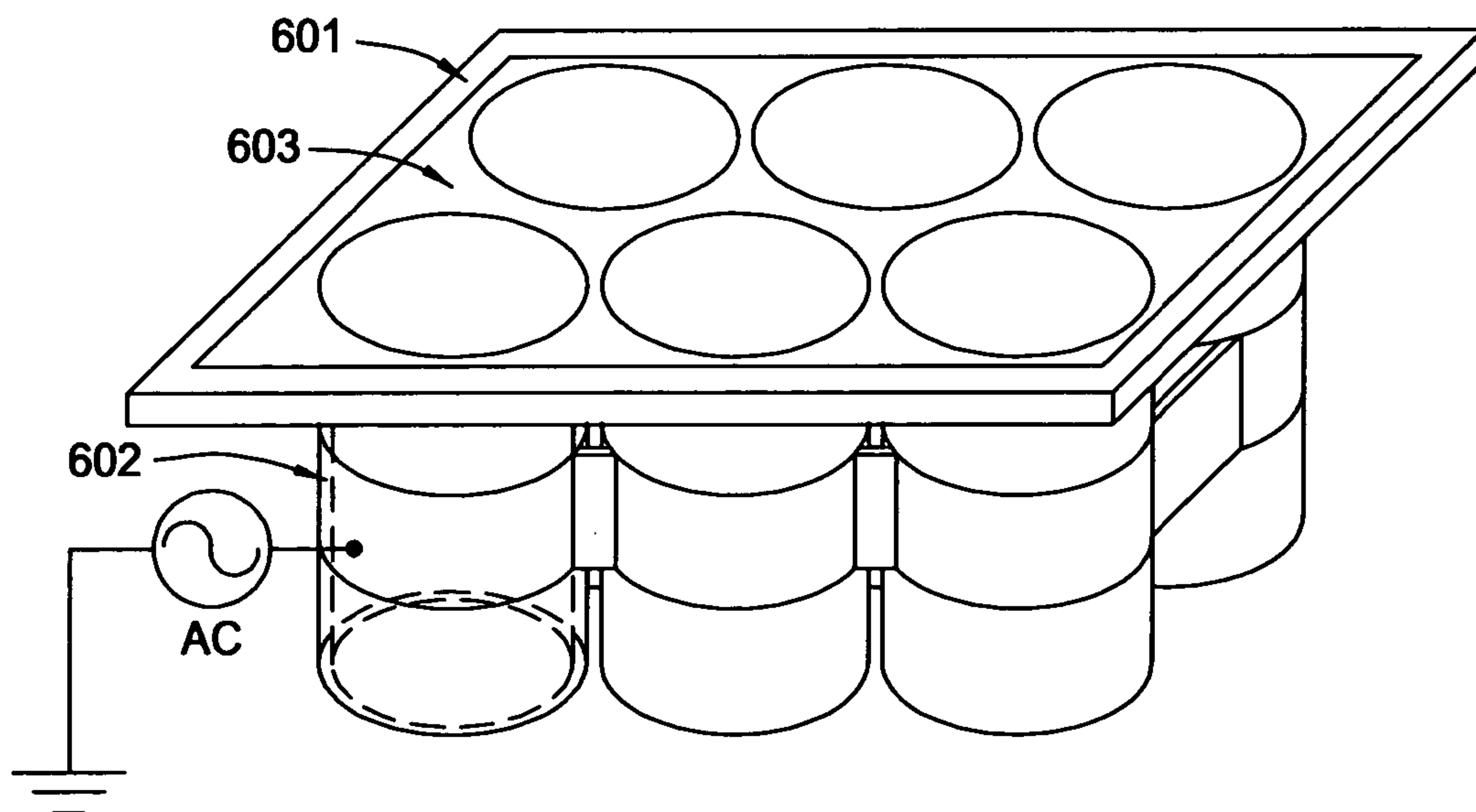


FIG. 6

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**ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE NON-THERMAL
PLASMA DEVICE TO CLEAN AND
STERILIZE THE SURFACES OF PROBES,
CANNULAS, PIN TOOLS, PIPETTES AND
SPRAY HEADS**

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED
APPLICATIONS

This application is a divisional application of co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/858,272, filed Jun. 1, 2004 entitled "Atmospheric Pressure Non-Thermal Plasma Device to Clean and Sterilize The Surfaces of Probes, Cannulas, Pin Tools, Pipettes and Spray Heads", which application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/478,418, entitled "Atmospheric Pressure Non-Thermal Plasma Device to Clean and Sterilize The Surfaces of Probes, Cannulas, Pin Tools, Pipettes and Spray Heads", filed on Jun. 16, 2003, both prior applications of which are herein incorporated by reference in their entirety.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Within the disciplines of the clinical, industrial and life science laboratory, scientists perform methods and protocols with extremely small quantities of fluids. These fluids consist of many categories and types with various physical properties. Frequently, volumes are worked with that are between a drop (about 25 microliters) and a few nanoliters. There are a number of standard methods employed to transfer liquid compounds from a source by aspirating the liquid from such fluid holding devices into a fluid handling device having a probe, cannula, pin tool or other similar component or plurality of components that move, manually or robotically, and then dispensing, from the same probe or plurality of probes, into another fluid holding device.

Four common techniques are (1) a scheme using a probe or cannula, that may or may not be coated with a layer of material or special coating, which is attached directly or by a tube to a pumping device, (2) a scheme using a disposable pipette instead of the probe/cannula but otherwise similar, (3) a scheme using a spray head with one or a plurality of openings and pumping system that physically propels multiple precisely metered microdroplets, and (4) a scheme using metal shafts with precisely machined hollowed out spaces at their ends that hold the fluid by surface tension (commonly referred to as a "pin tool").

As routine a process as fluid transfer is in the laboratory, technical challenges remain to achieve suitable levels of cleanliness of the dispensing devices. Currently the fluid handling devices undergo a "tip wash" process wherein they are cleansed in between use with a liquid solvent, such as DMSO or water. After the "tip wash" process, the used and now contaminated liquids must then be properly disposed of with respect to the required environmental regulations. As an alternative to this wet "tip wash" process, atmospheric pressure plasma can be used to replace the liquid cleaning process with a "dry" plasma cleaning process, thus eliminating the need for the handling and disposal of solvents that are biohazards and environmentally unfriendly.

The term "plasma" is generally used to denote the region in an electric gas discharge that has an equal number of positive ions and negative electrons (N. St. J. Braithwaite, "Introduction to gas discharges" Plasma Sources Science and Technology, V9, 2000, p517-527; H. Conrads et al., "Plasma Generation and Plasma Sources" Plasma Sources

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Science and Technology, V9, 2000, p441-454). A non-thermal, or non-equilibrium, plasma is one in which the temperature of the plasma electrons is higher than the temperature of the ionic and neutral species. Within an atmospheric pressure non-thermal plasma, there is typically an abundance of other energetic and reactive particles, such as ultraviolet photons, excited and/or metastable atoms and molecules, and free radicals. For example, within an air plasma, there are excited and metastable species of N₂, N, O₂, O, free radicals such as OH, NO, O, and O₃, and ultraviolet photons ranging in wavelengths from 200 to 400 nanometers resulting from N₂, NO, and OH emissions.

The "dry" plasma cleaning process is achieved by exposing the surfaces of the fluid handling devices or other components to the atmospheric pressure plasma. The above mentioned reactive and energetic components can now interact with any contaminants on the surfaces, thereby volatilizing, dissociating, and reacting with the contaminants, to form smaller and benign gaseous compounds that are vented off through the plasma cleaning device.

In addition to removing various unwanted compounds, the plasma can also be used to sterilize the surfaces of the fluid handling devices. The same ultraviolet photons, especially those with wavelengths below 300 nm, the free radicals and metastable molecules, and the plasma electrons and ions, provide a very harsh environment in which bacteria, viruses, fungi and their corresponding spores are lysed or otherwise rendered non-viable and either partially or completely volatilized into gaseous compounds.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In one embodiment of the present invention, there is provided an apparatus for cleaning a fluid handling device. In one embodiment, the apparatus includes an array of channels, each made of a dielectric material and configured to accommodate a single fluid handling device, at least one electrode in contact with each channel for producing a discrete plasma in each channel, and at least one conducting ground adjacent to the array of channels. In one embodiment of the present invention, there is provided an apparatus that has at least one conducting ground adjacent to each of the channels. In another embodiment of the present invention, a fluid handling device is the conducting ground. In yet another embodiment, a fluid handling device forms a conducting ground.

In an embodiment of the present invention, a plasma is produced in a plasma cleaning apparatus by applying a voltage in the range from about 5000 Volts to 15000 Volts.

In an embodiment of the present invention, a channel of a plasma cleaning apparatus is cylindrical. In another embodiment, a channel of a plasma cleaning apparatus is rectangular. In one embodiment of the present invention, a channel of a plasma cleaning apparatus is closed on one end. In another embodiment, a channel of a plasma cleaning apparatus is open on both ends.

In one embodiment of the present invention, there is provided a plasma cleaning apparatus that is in direct communication with a vacuum source.

In an embodiment of the present invention, an apparatus may contain an array of plasma cleaning apparatuses. In one embodiment, an array of plasma cleaning apparatuses is in an arrangement corresponding to a microtiter plate format.

In one embodiment of the present invention, there is provided a plasma cleaning apparatus containing at least one rare gas.

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In an embodiment of the present invention, there is provided an apparatus for cleaning a fluid handling device, wherein the apparatus contains an array of channels in a configuration corresponding to a microtiter plate. In one embodiment, each channel includes a dielectric material and is configured to accommodate a single fluid handling device. In one aspect, there is at least one electrode in contact with each channel for producing a discrete plasma in each channel and, additionally, there is a continuous conducting ground adjacent to the array of channels. In one embodiment, the channels of an apparatus of the invention are cylindrical. In another embodiment, the channels of an apparatus of the invention are rectangular.

Another embodiment of the present invention features an apparatus for cleaning a fluid handling device, wherein the apparatus contains an array of channels in a configuration corresponding to a microtiter plate, further wherein each channel consists of a dielectric material and is configured to accommodate a single fluid handling device. In one embodiment, there is at least one electrode in contact with each channel for producing a discrete plasma in each channel and additionally, there is a conducting ground adjacent to each channel. In one embodiment, a fluid handling device forms the conducting ground for the channel in which the device is accommodated. In one embodiment, the channels of an apparatus of the invention are cylindrical. In another embodiment, the channels of an apparatus of the invention are rectangular.

In an embodiment of the present invention, a fluid handling device is inserted into a channel of a plasma cleaning apparatus such that the tip of the fluid handling device is located at about the center of the plasma field.

In one embodiment the present invention, there is provided a method of cleaning a fluid handling device by positioning at least a portion of a fluid handling device within the interior of a channel of a plasma cleaning apparatus and forming a plasma within the interior of each channel in order to clean the fluid handling device. In one embodiment of the present invention, there is provided a method of cleaning a plurality of fluid handling devices by positioning at least a portion of each of a plurality fluid handling devices within the interior of a discrete channel of a plasma cleaning apparatus and forming a plasma within the interior of each of the discrete channels to clean the plurality of fluid handling devices.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated herein and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate embodiments of the present invention and, together with the general description given above and the detailed description given below, serve to explain the features of the present invention. Some aspects of the drawings are not labeled, but are included to provide further details of the present invention. Further, in some drawings, if a feature is present more than once in a drawing, the feature may be referenced only once.

FIG. 1 is a cross section view of one embodiment of an atmospheric pressure plasma-based cleaning device of the present invention.

FIG. 2 is a top angle view of one embodiment of an atmospheric pressure plasma-based cleaning device of the present invention.

FIG. 3 is a cross section view of one embodiment of an atmospheric pressure plasma-based cleaning device of the

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present invention, wherein the upper dielectric portion is extended perpendicularly outward.

FIG. 4 is a top angle view of one embodiment of an atmospheric pressure plasma-based cleaning device of the present invention, wherein the upper dielectric portion is extended perpendicularly outward.

FIG. 5 is a cross section view of one embodiment of an atmospheric pressure plasma-based cleaning device of the present invention, wherein a conducting surface is situated adjacent to the top of a perpendicularly outward extended dielectric.

FIG. 6 is a top angle view of one embodiment of an atmospheric pressure plasma-based cleaning device of the present invention, wherein a conducting surface is situated adjacent to the top of a perpendicularly outward extended dielectric.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

In certain embodiments of the design of an atmospheric pressure plasma device according to the present invention, a dielectric barrier discharge (also known as a "silent discharge") scheme is used, where at least one electrode to which an alternating voltage is applied, includes an insulating dielectric (U. Kogelschatz et al. "Dielectric-Barrier Discharges, Principles and Applications" J. Phys IV France, 7, 1997, C4-47). The electrodes may comprise any conductive material. In one embodiment, a metal may be used. Metals useful in the present invention include, but are not limited to, copper, silver, aluminum, and combinations thereof. In another embodiment of the present invention, an alloy of metals may be used as the electrode. Alloys useful in the present invention include, but are not limited to stainless steel, brass, and bronze. In another embodiment of the present invention, a conductive compound may be used. Conductive compounds useful in the present invention include, but are not limited to indium-tin-oxide.

In one embodiment, an electrode may be formed using any method known in the art. In an embodiment, an electrode may be formed using a foil. In another embodiment, an electrode may be formed using a wire. In yet another embodiment, an electrode may be formed using a solid block. In another embodiment, an electrode may be deposited as a layer directly onto the dielectric. In one embodiment, an electrode may be formed using a conductive paint.

In an embodiment of the present invention, a plasma is obtained in a dielectric barrier discharge (DBD) when, during one phase of the applied alternating voltage, charges accumulate between the dielectric surface and the opposing electrode until the electric field is sufficiently high enough to initiate an electrical discharge through the gas gap (also known as "gas breakdown"). During an electrical discharge, an electric field from the redistributed charge densities may oppose the applied electric field and the discharge is terminated. In one embodiment, the applied voltage-discharge termination process may be repeated at a higher voltage portion of the same phase of the applied alternating voltage or during the next phase of the applied alternating voltage.

In another embodiment of the present invention, a corona discharge scheme may be used (E. M. van Veldhuizen, W. R. Rutgers. "Corona Discharges: fundamentals and diagnostics" Invited Paper, Proceedings of Frontiers in Low Temperature Plasma Diagnostics IV, Rolduc, The Netherlands, March 2001, pp. 40-49). In one embodiment, a corona discharge scheme may use asymmetric electrodes. In one embodiment of the present invention, a discharge develops

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within a high electric field region near the area of strongest curvature of a sharp electrode. If the applied voltage or electrode gap distance is such that the discharge cannot transverse the gas gap, then the resulting corona discharge will be limited by electron recombination and space charge diffusion. In one embodiment of the present invention, the tip of a probe, cannula or pin tool can serve as the region of strongest curvature and resulting high electric field to initiate a corona discharge.

Depending on the geometry and gas used for the plasma device, the applied voltages can range from 500 to 20,000 peak Volts, with frequencies ranging from line frequencies of 50 Hertz up to 20 Megahertz. In an embodiment of the present invention, the frequency of a power source may range from 50 Hertz up to 20 Megahertz. In another embodiment, the voltage and frequency may range from 5,000 to 15,000 peak Volts and 50 Hertz to 50,000 Hertz, respectively. By way of a non-limiting example, such parameters of voltage and frequency are commonly found in neon sign ballasts for lighting purposes (Universal Lighting Technologies, Inc, Nashville, Tenn.).

Dielectric materials useful in embodiments of the present invention include, but are not limited to, ceramic, glass, plastic, polymer epoxy, or a composite of one or more such materials, such as fiberglass or a ceramic filled resin (Cotronics Corp., Wetherill Park, Australia). In one embodiment, a ceramic dielectric is alumina. In another embodiment, a ceramic dielectric is a machinable glass ceramic (Corning Incorporated, Corning, N.Y.). In one embodiment, a glass dielectric is a borosilicate glass (Corning Incorporated, Corning, N.Y.). In another embodiment, a glass dielectric is quartz (GE Quartz, Inc., Willoughby, Ohio). In one embodiment, a plastic dielectric is polymethyl methacrylate (PLEXIGLASS and LUCITE, Dupont, Inc., Wilmington, Del.). In yet another embodiment, a plastic dielectric is polycarbonate (Dupont, Inc., Wilmington, Del.). In still another embodiment, a plastic dielectric is a fluoropolymer (Dupont, Inc., Wilmington, Del.). Dielectric materials useful in embodiments of the present invention typically have dielectric constants ranging between 2 and 30.

The gas used in a plasma device of embodiments of the invention can be ambient air, pure oxygen, any one of the rare gases, or a combination of each such as a mix of air or oxygen with argon and/or helium. Also, an additive can be added to the gas, such as hydrogen peroxide, to enhance specific plasma cleaning properties.

FIG. 1 shows a cross section of an embodiment of a DBD plasma cleaning device. In one embodiment, a dielectric includes a hollow open ended dielectric channel **101**, with a thickness *W* from about 0.5 mm to about 3 mm and a length *L* from about 1 cm to about 5 cm. Coupled to the outside of the dielectric is an electrode **102**, with an arbitrary thickness and a length *I* of about 0.5 to about 4 cm, which is connected to an AC power supply **104**. The exact dimensions of dielectric channel **101** are dependent on the properties of the materials used for fabrication. In an embodiment of the present invention, the dielectric constant and dielectric strength of a material may allow larger or smaller lengths and/or thicknesses of such materials.

In one embodiment, a plasma cleaning device is cylindrical. In another embodiment of the present invention, a plasma cleaning device is rectangular. In yet another embodiment, a plasma cleaning device of the present invention is elliptical. In still another embodiment, a plasma cleaning device of the invention is polygonal. Referring to FIG. 1, in one embodiment of the present invention, the end of a grounded fluid handling device **103** is inserted into the

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dielectric channel to a point in between electrode **102** at the midpoint of length *I* of electrode **102**, and acts as the opposing electrode. Plasma is thereby formed in between the outer surface of the fluid handling device **103** and the inner walls of the dielectric channel **101**. In one embodiment, a plasma is a dielectric barrier discharge plasma. In another embodiment, a plasma is a corona discharge plasma. The free space *H* between the top and bottom edges of electrode **102** and the top and bottom edges of dielectric channel **101** is spaced a sufficient distance to prevent arcing between electrode **101** and fluid handling device **103**, which in this embodiment acts as a ground. In one embodiment, the space is about 0.5 mm to about 10 mm to prevent arcing around the dielectric. In one embodiment, the minimum dimensions of space *H* may be determined as the distance required such that the corresponding electric field circumventing dielectric **101**, but between electrodes **103** and **102**, is not sufficient to induce a gas breakdown directly between **103** and **102**. It will also be understood that the maximum dimension of space *H* may be determined by how far the tip of fluid handling device **103** can be inserted into the channel formed by dielectric **101**.

Any volatilized contaminants and other products from the plasma may be vented through the bottom of the device by coupling the bottom of the chamber formed by the dielectric to a region of negative pressure. In one embodiment, a region of negative pressure is a vacuum. In one embodiment, a vacuum is in direct communication with a channel of the plasma device and is used to draw plasma products through the bottom of a plasma device.

FIG. 2 shows an embodiment of a DBD plasma cleaning device with a plurality of dielectric barrier discharge structures, with each individual plasma unit similar to that shown in FIG. 1. Outer surface **203** of the individual dielectric channels **201** are all coupled to a common outer electrode **202**. In one embodiment, electrode **202** is connected to an AC power supply. In another embodiment, a power supply is a DC power supply. In one embodiment, a DC power supply is pulsed and employs a square waveform. In another embodiment, a DC power supply is pulsed and employs a sawtooth waveform.

A plurality of grounded fluid handling devices can be inserted in the plasma device and be simultaneously processed. The spacing between each of the individual plasma devices within the plurality are determined by the geometries of the fluid handling devices to be inserted. Typical geometries for dielectric structure **201** can follow those set by the Society for Biomolecular Engineering, Microplate Standards Development Committee for 96, 384, or 1536 well microplates (Publication ANSI/SBS 4-2004, "Well Positions for Microplates," January 2004, The Society for Biomolecular Screening, www.sbsonline.com). Other geometries include single opening units and openings in linear and two dimensional arrays.

Several procedures may be used to clean or sterilize the inner and outer surfaces of the fluid handling device. To clean, sterilize, or otherwise process the inner surfaces, the reactive and energetic components of the plasma are repeatedly aspirated into the fluid handling device, using the fluid handling devices' aspirating and dispensing capability, with the aspiration volume, rate, and frequency determined by the desired amount of cleaning/sterilization required.

As shown in FIG. 1, in one embodiment of the present invention, for cleaning or sterilizing the outer surfaces of a fluid handling device, the end of fluid handling device **103** can be inserted to a position before or at the top of electrode **102** to just clean the end of fluid handling device **103**, or it

can be inserted to a position further below the top level of electrode **102** to clean the outer surfaces of the fluid handling device. The period of time the plasma is on and the reactive and energetic components are in contact with the surfaces is also determined by required processing parameters.

In an embodiment of the present invention, the DBD plasma device may have its upper dielectric portion extended perpendicularly along Arrow A so that powered electrode **302** is also covered from the top as shown in the representative cross section in FIG. 3. This configuration allows the spacing J between electrode **302** and dielectric **301** to be smaller than the spacing H for the preventing of arcing around dielectric **301**. In an embodiment, the minimum dimensions of space J may be determined as the distance required such that the corresponding electric field circumventing dielectric **301**, and between electrode **302** and electrode **303**, here the fluid handling device, is not sufficient to induce a gas breakdown directly between **303** and **302**. In one embodiment, the maximum dimension of space J may be determined by how far the tip of fluid handling device **303** is inserted into a plasma cleaning device. In one embodiment of the invention, the tip of a fluid handling device **303** is situated midway in a plasma field. In another embodiment, the tip of a fluid handling device **303** is situated at about the center of a plasma field within a plasma cleaning device. In one embodiment, the tip of a liquid handling device **303** is inserted into a plasma cleaning device to the midpoint of electrode **302**. In another embodiment, the tip of a fluid handling device **303** is placed within the region of maximum plasma density. The thickness W of dielectric **301** is similar to that discussed elsewhere herein with respect to FIG. 1. Furthermore, there can be no spacing J, such that the top of electrode **302** is adjacent to the bottom of perpendicularly extended dielectric **301**. This will result in a plasma being created when the grounded fluid handling device is brought near to the top of dielectric **301** but still outside the dielectric channel.

FIG. 4 illustrates an embodiment of the present invention, including a plurality of DBD devices, each sharing a common extended upper dielectric **401**, which covers common electrode **402** from the top.

In another embodiment, a conducting surface **503** of any thickness can be placed adjacent to the top of the perpendicularly extended dielectric. FIG. 5 shows a cross section of one embodiment of a representative design with a hole in conducting surface **503** aligned with the opening in dielectric surface **501**. As shown in FIG. 5, inner edge M of conducting surface **503** can vertically cover inner dielectric wall **504** of dielectric **501** in addition to the top of the opening of dielectric **501**. If conducting surface **503** is grounded, a plasma can now be formed in between the space K between the top of powered electrode **502** and inner edge M of grounded electrode **503**. Referring to FIG. 5, in one embodiment of the present invention, the maximum distance of space K may be determined wherein the electric field between edge M of electrode **503** located within the channel formed by dielectric **501** and inner dielectric wall **504** corresponding to the top of **502** is sufficient to allow for gas breakdown and the formation of a plasma within the channel formed by dielectric **501**.

In one embodiment of the present invention, the minimum distance of space K may be zero. In another embodiment of the present invention, the minimum distance of space K may be a value greater than zero. The optimization of space K facilitates the creation of a more uniform and diffuse volumetric plasma inside the cylindrical channel formed by dielectric **501** when a grounded fluid handling device is

inserted. In one embodiment of the invention, K is a distance between zero mm and 20 mm. In one embodiment, K is a distance between 1 mm and 10 mm. In an embodiment, K is about 3 mm.

In one embodiment, conducting surface **503** can be left unconnected from ground by a switch so as to not have it participate as an electrode during the plasma cleaning/sterilization process. This will facilitate the creation of a more concentrated plasma at the extreme end of the fluid handling device as opposed to a diffuse volumetric plasma around the end.

FIG. 6 illustrates one embodiment of the present invention, featuring a representative design of a plurality of DBD plasma devices sharing a common conducting surface **603**, which can be grounded or ungrounded, and a common powered electrode **602**, each separated by a common perpendicularly extended dielectric **601**.

In an embodiment of the present invention, a plurality of DBD plasma devices are arranged in a format of a microtiter plate. Examples of microtiter plate formats include, but are not limited to, a 96-well plate format, a 384-well plate format, and 1536-well plate format. However, it will be understood that plate formats having fewer than 96 wells, such as 48-well, 24-well, 12-well and 6-well formats, are also useful in embodiments of the present invention. In one embodiment, the physical properties of a channel useful in embodiments of the present invention, such as a channel formed by a well in a microtiter plate, can be determined based on the properties of the dielectric material used, the dimensions of such a channel, and the amount and character of energy used to produce a plasma within such a channel, as described in detail elsewhere herein. Similarly, the amount and character of energy used to produce a plasma within a channel may be determined, as described in detail elsewhere herein, by analysis of the physical properties of such a channel and the properties of the dielectric material used.

In an embodiment of the present invention, an array of liquid handling devices may also be in a format compatible with a microtiter plate. In another embodiment, an array of liquid handling devices compatible with a microtiter plate format may be cleaned using an apparatus or method of the present invention. Microtiter plate handling devices useful in the present invention include, but are not limited to those using an XYZ format for liquid handling, such as the TECAN GENESIS (Tecan, Durham, N.C.). Other microplate handling formats compatible with embodiments of the present invention include those used with instruments such as the Beckman Coulter FX (Beckman Coulter, Fullerton, Calif.) and the TekCel TekBench (TekCel, Hopkinton, Mass.).

While the present invention has been described in detail and with reference to specific embodiments thereof, it will be apparent to one skilled in the art that various changes and modifications can be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope thereof. Thus, it is intended that embodiments of the present invention covers the modifications and variations of this invention provided they come within the scope of the appended claims and their equivalents. Further, each and every reference disclosed herein is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of cleaning a fluid handling device, comprising:
 - inserting a tip of the fluid handling device into an interior of a channel through a first opening disposed at a first end of the channel;

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- causing a plasma to be formed within the interior of the channel; and
 removing the fluid handling device from the channel through the first opening, wherein the step of causing a plasma to be formed further comprises aspirating reactive and energetic components of the plasma into the fluid handling device.
2. The method of claim 1, further comprising venting volatilized contaminants and other products from the plasma to a region of negative pressure.
3. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
 providing a vacuum source in communication with the channel; and
 drawing plasma products through a bottom of the channel towards the vacuum source.
4. The method of claim 1, wherein the inserting step further comprises inserting the tip of the fluid handling device a predetermined distance into the channel.
5. The method of claim 1, wherein the inserting step further comprises inserting the tip of the fluid handling device into a midway point of the plasma.
6. The method of claim 1, wherein the inserting step further comprises inserting the tip of the fluid handling device into a region of maximum plasma density.
7. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of causing a plasma to be formed further comprises:
 grounding the tip of the fluid handling device.
8. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of causing a plasma to be formed further comprises:
 inserting a grounded wire into the channel.
9. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of causing a plasma to be formed further comprises:
 applying a voltage between about 5000 V to about 15000 V to an electrode that surrounds the channel.
10. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of causing a plasma to be formed further comprises:
 applying a voltage at frequency of between about 50 Hz and about 14 MHz to an electrode that surrounds the channel.
11. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
 providing a conductive surface proximate the first end of the channel, the conductive surface substantially surrounding the first opening.
12. The method of claim 11, wherein the conductive surface further comprises an extension that protrudes into the channel.
13. The method of claim 11, further comprising a dielectric flange disposed about the first opening and disposed beneath the conductive surface.

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14. The method of claim 1, wherein the channel comprises a bottom surface opposing the first opening.
15. The method of claim 1, wherein the channel comprises a second opening opposing the first opening.
16. The method of claim 1, wherein the fluid handling device comprises at least one of a probe, a cannula, a pin tool, a pipette, or a spray head.
17. The method of claim 1, wherein the fluid handling device is configured to handle volumes of fluid ranging from about 25 microliters to about a few nanoliters.
18. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
 sterilizing the fluid handling device with the plasma.
19. A method of cleaning a plurality of fluid handling devices, comprising:
 inserting a tip of each of the fluid handling devices into an interior of a respective channel of an array of channels through a first opening disposed at a first end of each channel of the array of channels;
 causing a plasma to be formed within the interior of the array of channels; and
 removing the fluid handling devices from the array of channels through the first openings, wherein the step of causing a plasma to be formed further comprises aspirating reactive and energetic components of the plasma into the fluid handling devices.
20. The method of claim 19, wherein the array of channels are disposed in a microtiter plate format.
21. The method of claim 19, wherein the step of causing a plasma to be formed further comprises:
 applying a voltage to an electrode that respectively surrounds each channel of the array of channels.
22. The method of claim 19, further comprising:
 venting volatilized contaminants and other products from the plasma.
23. The method of claim 19, wherein the plurality of fluid handling devices comprise at least one of a probe, a cannula, a pin tool, a pipette, or a spray head.
24. The method of claim 19, wherein the plurality of fluid handling devices are configured to handle volumes of fluid ranging from about 25 microliters to about a few nanoliters.
25. The method of claim 19, further comprising:
 sterilizing the plurality of fluid handling devices with the plasma.

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